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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 003679

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SUBJECT: ANTI-AMERICAN, PRO-HIZBALLAH THEMES PREDOMINATE IN SYRIA, WITH BACKBEAT OF DOUBTS, FEARS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Rising anti-American sentiment is evident in Syria in response to the aerial bombardment Israel has unleashed on Lebanon in the past two weeks. Many contacts, reflecting widespread public sentiment, accuse the U.S. of using Israel's military might to impose its own agenda on Lebanon and the region and of failing to criticize Israel's actions. Powerful, often very emotional, support for Hizballah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah has also welled up, with Syrians viewing Nasrallah as an authentic Arab nationalist hero. Contacts report the SARG asking them not to stage pro-Hizballah demonstrations because of fears they will get out of control. Privately, some contacts point to a degree of Sunni discomfort that Hizballah is being used by Iran to make Shiite inroads in Sunni countries like Syria. There is some criticism that the SARG has embraced Hizballah too closely, and concern about Syria being dragged into the conflict. Civil society activists expect increased internal repression in the wake of the fighting. End Summary.

¶2. (C) POWERFUL ANTI-AMERICAN CURRENTS NOTED: Anti-American sentiment in Syria has risen dramatically in the past two weeks as Syrians are transfixed by daily emotional television coverage of the human cost and widespread destruction in Lebanon caused by the Israeli retaliation against Hizballah. The Israeli response is viewed here overwhelmingly as disproportionate. Contacts report that the U.S. is perceived, for the first time, as using Israel's military might to impose its own agenda on Lebanon and the region, chiefly the implementation of UNSCR 1559 (and the disarming of Hizballah), along with U.S. plans for "a new Middle East." "It turns out that Israel is an instrument of U.S. policy after all," and not vice versa, noted economist (and former Deputy Minister of Planning) Riad Abrash. Others like influential Sunni religious leader Salah Kuftaro criticized the U.S. bitterly for its failure to utter "a word of denunciation" about the death and destruction caused in Lebanon. Even contacts in the Christian community, normally more reserved and less hostage to street sentiment, reported rapidly increasing anti-U.S. feeling. The Papal Nuncio told the Charge that he has been struck by the vehement anti-Israeli sentiments expressed by his Syrian bishops. There is also powerful resentment against Arab regimes, especially those in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are viewed as unsupportive of Hizballah and overly sympathetic to U.S. designs for the region.

¶3. (C) NASRALLAH AS THE LATEST ARAB SAVIOR: In tandem with these sentiments are powerful feelings of admiration for

Hizballah and its leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah and for the "heroic" fight they have waged against Israel. Nasrallah is seen "an Arab nationalist hero," according to Dr. Asem Kubtan, an activist in the small pan-Arab opposition party, the Democratic Arab Socialist Union. Abrash referred to Nasrallah as "the most popular man in the Arab world right now," insisting that his popularity and that of Hizballah cuts across all sectarian, gender, age, and class lines in Syria. People also support the resistance in Lebanon -- and are happy to see it stand up to Israel -- because of powerful feelings of frustration, despair, and a sense of political humiliation in Syria and throughout the Arab world, the product of decades of occupation and a history of colonialism, noted former Damascus Spring detainee Habib Issa. Human rights activist Mohammed al-Hassani insisted to Poloff that Syrians overwhelmingly support Nasrallah because of the powerful need for "a savior," just as Arab masses had in the past supported Nasser and Saddam Hussein. These contacts maintain that Syrian support for Nasrallah crosses sectarian, gender, age, and class divisions.

14. (C) PRAYING FOR A HIZBALLAH VICTORY: Many contacts also pointed to the heavy emotional reaction many Syrians had to events in Lebanon. To illustrate, the avowedly secular Abrash pointed to his wife (an upper-class Sunni like himself), not normally focused on politics, who "is glued to the television and is praying for a Hizballah victory each day." A few Syrians have told Polchief they feel so strongly that they would be willing to go to Lebanon and help out with the "jihad" being waged by Hizballah. While there was some quiet criticism of Nasrallah heard in the first days of the Israeli attacks, as a few noted Hizballah's apparent gross miscalculation of the Israeli response, that has faded away now, with people insisting that Israel and the U.S. set a

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trap for Hizballah. According to this conspiratorial view, a pretext for attacking Hizballah would have been manufactured if Hizballah had not conveniently supplied one, to proceed with forcibly disarming the militia.

15. (C) REGIME CONCERN ABOUT DEMONSTRATIONS GETTING OUT OF CONTROL: These anti-U.S., pro-Hizballah sentiments are powerful enough that the regime is concerned about it, according to a number of contacts. While it has whipped up some of this sentiment itself, with its state-owned media, regional satellite T.V. has also played a role. Sheikh Kuftaro and political activist Kubtan told Polchief separately that government representatives have asked them not to hold any demonstrations in support of Hizballah. Instead the government has arranged a few of its own carefully controlled demonstrations. Kuftaro noted that officials in the security services insisted that he not allow any demonstration after his Friday sermon at the Abu Noor Institute last week, for fear it would get out of control. For his part, to try to stay ahead of the popular anger, so as to better control it, Kuftaro spoke emotionally in his sermon about opening a second front on the Golan to ease the pressure on the resistance. He told Polchief subsequently that he knew the proposal was a non-starter with the regime and also had little popular support, but it allowed him to appear as understanding and sympathizing with the intense street sentiment. Kuftaro in an aside claimed that security officials subsequently complained to him about the Golan remarks, saying they had made the government uncomfortable and were not welcome.

16. (C) MINORITY VIEWS: While these anti-U.S. and pro-Hizballah sentiments predominate at the popular level and to a significant if lesser degree among political elites, there are minority views and nuances evident. A few contacts questioned the intensity of the anti-U.S. feeling and predicted it would fade quickly, since some of it is regime-manufactured. Others noted that beneath the surface, and despite the powerful identification with Hizballah and its confrontation with Israel, there remain muted Sunni

suspensions about the Shiite affiliation of the militia. Al-Hayat bureau chief Ibrahim Hamidi pointed out that the regime "put Sunni religious leader Mohammed al-Buti on Syrian TV" a week ago to squelch such talk and encourage Syrians (the vast majority of whom are Sunnis) to identify with Hizballah's struggle. Ba'athist reformer (and prominent Christian) Ayman Abdul Noor noted that the SARG-owned media never refers to Hizballah's Shiite identity, and rarely refers to Hizballah by name, preferring to call it the Lebanese Islamic resistance.

17. (C) Other contacts observed that while Hizballah is admired for its confrontation with Israel, support slips when there is talk about its role in an arc of Shiite influence that extends from Iran, through Iraq, to Lebanon. Kuftaro noted that his private views are more anti-Hizballah than those on the street, as are those of many in the Sunni religious establishment in Syria. Kuftaro insisted that Sunni religious leaders have reservations about the leadership of the Lebanese resistance "being in the hands of the Shiites" and added that Iran is using Hizballah to spread Shiite influence -- and convert Sunnis -- in Syria and other Sunni countries. Businessman and former MP Ihsan Sankar, admitting that his anti-Hizballah view was a minority one among his business colleagues, predicted that Nasrallah's (and Hizballah's) popularity would decline significantly, arguing that the dimensions of its defeat and Lebanon's destruction will eventually become evident.

18. (C) "GETTING STUCK" WITH HIZBALLAH: There is also a view being expressed quietly, among some elite Sunnis, Christians, and Alawites, that the regime has overly embraced Hizballah, and "now we are stuck with them," and their disastrous policies, reported Abdul Noor. In his view, it would be almost impossible now for the regime to abandon Hizballah, "even if it were offered the Golan." Abdul Noor also criticized the SARG for "attacking" and angering its Arab allies over the Hizballah issue. In his view, Syria needed -- and should opt for -- support from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, for investment and political support, rather than a pro-Hizballah alliance with Iran. (Note: The SARG-orchestrated demonstrations have included insulting chants referring to different Arab leaders perceived as not supporting Hizballah, such as Egyptian President Mubarak.)

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19. (C) FEARS OF GETTING DRAGGED INTO THE CONFLICT: Many Syrians are expressing deep concern about Syria possibly being dragged into the conflict or being attacked by Israel, although contacts generally discounted the notion that the SARG would do anything to provoke Israel into widening the conflict. Abdul Noor derided SARG military capabilities, noting to Polchief that the army could not even mobilize its reserves successfully because of lack of resources and poor organization. He and others also expressed doubt that the SARG would be reckless enough to try to re-supply Hizballah with weapons. Nonetheless, they expressed the fear that Israel may attack Syria, for example, if the IDF gets bogged down in Lebanon and is unable to gain the expected military victory over Hizballah. Such an attack would be designed to widen the conflict and distract from IDF failure in Lebanon.

110. (C) EVEN BUSINESSMEN PRO-HIZBALLAH: The consensus in the Syrian business community is that the SARG is committed to remaining out of direct involvement in the present conflict in Lebanon. A solid majority of the business elite we've talked to in the last week are also convinced that the SARG is ready to cut a deal that could lead to a more comprehensive settlement of regional conflicts. As the present conflict continues, support within the largely Sunni business community is galvanizing behind Hizballah and the sometimes pointed criticisms of the regime from the business elite are becoming increasingly rare. All seem to believe the time is now ripe for the USG to reengage the SARG in a high-level dialogue as businessmen believe regime elements

are highly suspicious of Iran and fear that Ahmadinejad's willingness to pursue Iranian regional hegemony will eventually run counter to Syrian interests.

¶11. (C) LOTS OF PESSIMISM AND CONCERN FOR LONGER TERM: Many contacts, regardless of how they feel about Hizballah or the Syrian regime, are also striking notes of pessimism and concern about the longer term. They express concern, with the intensity varying depending on the day's news cycle, that Hizballah may eventually absorb a substantial military and political blow, although no one we spoke with expected the Shiite group to suffer a complete defeat and "be destroyed." Civil society activists Issa and Hassani predicted increased SARG internal repression in the wake of the conflict in Lebanon, regardless of the outcome, as the regime sought to suppress any notion that events there could have blowback and cause instability in Syria. The "ceiling of fear" is already being lowered significantly, asserted Hassani. Some contacts assessed that despite such efforts, the regime will emerge after the conflict in Lebanon, regardless of the specific outcome and any Hizballah attempts to declare victory, in a weakened and more isolated state. According to academic Amr al-Azm, Syria is likely to face increased pressure from the U.S. and much of the rest of the international community, as they attempt to disarm Hizballah and choke off any possibility of Hizballah re-armament by Syria, ensuring that the militia transitions to an exclusively political presence in Lebanon. In his view, if Hizballah suffers what is perceived as a serious defeat, the Syrian regime will be less stable.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: In the past 48 hours, in the wake of the Secretary's visit to the region, and with anticipation having

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built up in advance of the Rome meeting, there was a spike in speculation that the U.S. might re-engage with Syria as it seeks to implement a sustainable cease-fire. Ordinarily such high-level U.S. diplomatic engagement would be expected to alleviate to a degree the anti-American sentiments that have developed, countering perceptions here of U.S. bias towards Israel. However, the negative press coming out of the Rome meeting will likely mean little relief in the short term from the prevailing view that U.S. policy is wed to Israel's interests.

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